

San Diego's bright solar future

By Dick Murphy Donna Frye and Michael Zucchet

Murphy is mayor of San Diego. Frye and Zucchet are San Diego City Council members.

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Each day, the sun generates enough energy to satisfy the needs of every citizen on the planet for 27 years. The city of San Diego is poised to take advantage of this free resource and move toward energy independence and cleaner air by adopting a goal of generating 50 megawatts of electricity from renewable energy resources by 2013.

This clean energy plan, which calls for generating roughly 35 megawatts from solar and 15 megawatts from landfill gas – enough to power more than 32,000 homes – will provide our city with another important defense against the increasing unreliable electrical power supplies and volatile prices.

The energy crisis of 2000-01 taught San Diego a painful lesson – overdependence on fossil fuel-generated electrical power can become the city's Achilles' heel.

The city's energy bills skyrocketed during the energy crisis, as did the bills of San Diego's businesses and residents. To ensure that we do not again fall prey to energy companies that put profits before people, we must take control of our energy future. Otherwise, we remain vulnerable to unreliable and volatile energy markets.

Many experts maintain the energy crisis is far from over. Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham has noted that supplies of natural gas – the fuel that provides almost 90 percent of new energy generation in California – are 32 percent below last year's level and 22 percent below the five-year average. With volatility comes higher costs, and cities that are the least prepared will be the hardest hit.

In an effort to reclaim control, Mayor Dick Murphy made energy independence one of his 10 goals in 2001. Since then, city staff and the council have worked to invest in energy conservation measures and advance locally produced, renewable energy resources like solar energy and landfill gas.

The city has solar-power systems on four city buildings and is pursuing a low-interest loan to install solar arrays on an additional 30 buildings. The city is targeting major consumers like fire stations, police stations, libraries and swimming pools for solar arrays and conservation measures.

San Diego also recently passed a sustainable buildings expedite program, accelerating the review process for new residential and commercial development projects that employ renewable resources to generate at least 50 percent of the power for their residential units and 30 percent for their commercial spaces.

The city's quest for energy independence also will create opportunities for local economic development. Installing renewable energy and energy-efficiency systems requires the services of local electricians, contractors and solar companies. San Diego has an opportunity to take advantage of a burgeoning rapidly growing industry that will create new, high-quality jobs and increase revenue for the city.

The city will concurrently establish a renewable energy advisory committee to make recommendations to the council on how the city can achieve our 50-megawatt goal. The committee will explore strategies for implementing renewables on both city facilities and private homes and businesses. One of the most important tasks for the committee will be investigating financing options for all types of solar projects.

A host of alternatives are available to allow San Diego to finance solar systems and conservation measures that guarantee competitive energy prices into the future and make long-term financial sense for the city budget. It will be up to the committee to advise the council on which options make the most sense for city taxpayers.

In order to make this goal a reality, the city needs the support and cooperation of key stakeholders – local utilities, the business community, builders, environmental organizations, consumer groups and residents. The city must work with San Diego Gas & Electric and the California Public Utilities Commission to remove the administrative, regulatory and legal hurdles to broad-scale solar implementation. Working together as a united community is the only way to succeed in this endeavor.

We are excited about this next stage in our plan for clean energy in the city. We look forward to working with the citizens of San Diego to make ours a model city for energy independence and cleaner air.

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